

# Greenheads kept at bay — for a while

## Cool weather delays assault

By Karen Hayes  
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**C**hris Caldwell, a lifelong Duxbury resident, stands in line at J's ice cream truck in the Duxbury Beach parking lot and watches warily as a few greenhead flies lock and load. Even more lurk inside the truck, attracted to the heat and darkness.

"They hurt when they bite," Caldwell said, swatting at his legs. "I can't wait for them to leave."

The good news — if there is any when it comes to these bloodthirsty insects — is that last month's cool weather has kept greenhead numbers down along the coast, for the time being.

The bad news is that lower temperatures have only delayed the inevitable. Even though their season may be pushed back slightly this year, the bugs soon will be biting in usual numbers at a beach near you, if they have not already started in, insect experts and others say.

The peak season for adult greenheads, technically called *Tabanus nigrovittatus*, is usually July and August, said Mark Buffone, an entomologist with the pesti-  
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bureau of the state Department of Food and Agriculture. The insects, which are related to horseflies and deerflies, generally start dying off by early September, he said.

"If it's been really cool, their emergence might be later in the summer, and their decline would be later," he said. "The weather this year has been unusual. This summer we have had more wind and cooler temperatures in July."

Therefore, many communities around these parts have not yet seen the worst of the heat-and-humidity-loving greenheads. Still, greenheads pack such a nasty bite and are so persistent, even one is cause for alarm among most beach and salt marsh fans.

Donna MacDonald has been taking her son, Liam, to Duxbury Beach every day this summer. Asked last week how bad the bugs have been, her answer was a slap. "I just killed one," she said.

MacDonald, who has lived in Duxbury four years, said the greenheads have started to pick up steam but have not yet been as bad as in past summers.

"They are less likely to get you when you are chasing a 16-month-old," said MacDonald, a teacher in Boston schools.

Her father, Gus Hartnett, had his own method of dealing with bugs. "I have an excellent alternative — a rolled-up newspaper," he said.

On the beach, Chris McBride, who is in the middle of her first summer as a lifeguard, voiced similar sentiments.

"I've been here long enough to know they are vicious flies," she said.

The reason behind such hostility is simple: pain. Greenheads don't just bite, they tear through skin with all the finesse of a chainsaw.

"The mouth parts are blade-like," Buffone said. "In actuality, it cuts like a knife. It will cut or slash and then it sponges up the blood that pools. It is a very, very painful bite."

Shannon Smith, also a Duxbury Beach lifeguard, described greenhead bites as much worse than mosquito bites. "You get a lot bigger bump and it's very itchy," she said.

Greenheads, so named for their large, green, iridescent eyes, breed in salt marshes. Their larvae, small worms, develop in marshy areas over the winter. As marsh ooze begins to heat up in spring and early summer, the larvae become pupae, a cocoon stage, before transforming into adults.

The insects prefer hot, still, humid weather, Buffone said. When the sun beats down on the marshes and there is not a lot of wind, females take off to within a mile of their breeding grounds in search of protein for egg development. Unlike mosquitoes, they are most active in the daytime.

The insects can be particularly tough on local birdwatchers, who often venture out into salt marshes this time of year to sight migrating

shore birds.

"You are always fidgeting and antsy. It's part of it," said David Clapp, director of the Massachusetts Audubon Society's South Shore Regional Office in Marshfield for the past 15 years. "Right now, sandpipers that nested in the north are headed south. You've got to go birding this time of year. Summer's over; winter's here. The birds are headed south. You've got to go out. This is the big passage. You've got to put up with the bugs."

The Audubon nature trails, which wind along the North River on the line between Marshfield and Scituate, pass through acres of marshy terrain. Clapp said the greenheads have not yet been bad this year. And Jennifer McCormack, recreation director in Scituate, said she has not yet received complaints about them on town beaches.

Nature's defense against greenheads is the swallow, which eats hundreds of flying insects daily, Clapp said. Around this time of year, swallows form huge flocks of between 10,000 to 50,000 birds in Green Harbor in Marshfield, Saquish Beach in Plymouth and Plymouth Beach, he said.

"They cruise the marshes all day eating bugs," Clapp said. "On the other hand, the birds wouldn't be there unless there were lots of bugs."

Greenhead boxes, which line many salt marshes in the region, also help stem the tide of greenheads to a point. Females are attracted to the dark-colored traps. Once caught inside their screens, they cannot get out and starve. The boxes trap more than 1,000 flies daily but are susceptible to vandalism, bird droppings and pecking and must be maintained, he said.

Greenheads are attracted to the body's carbon dioxide output and lactic acid excreted in perspiration. Some people are bitten more than others because of their body chemistry.

Locally, the jury is still out on the effectiveness of Avon's Skin So Soft in repelling greenheads. Some locals swear by it, while others say its effectiveness is nothing more than an old wife's tale.

"A lot of people tend to use Skin So Soft," Clapp said. "It doesn't work. You are much better off with, I hate to say it, real chemicals. Spray them on your clothing, not on your skin."

Lifeguard McBride begs to differ. "I use Skin So Soft," she said. "It smells good. It's greasy - too greasy for the greenheads."

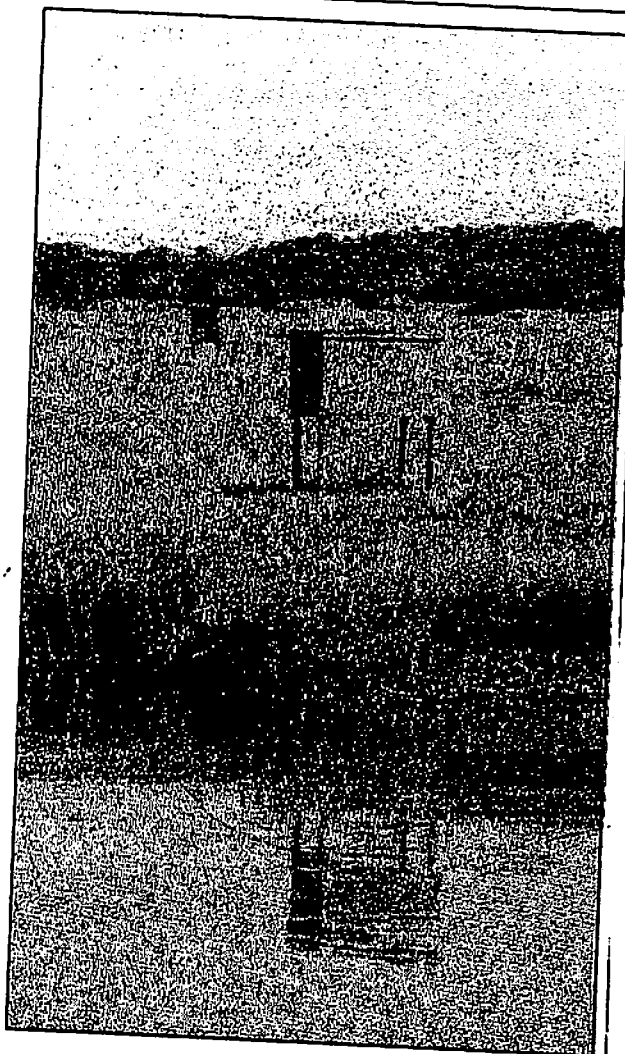
Smith, who is 18 and has been coming to Duxbury Beach her entire life, uses Deep Woods Off. But most beach-lovers agree, nothing much helps.

There are no easy answers to insect problems, Buffone said. "The problem with greenheads is their distribution over the salt marsh is so great," he said. "You don't want to be spraying. It would be impractical, and there are a lot of beneficial critters in there. You don't want to up-

set the balance."

MacDonald took a philosophical approach as she lounged on the

beach. "The bottom line is they were here first, so we have to put up with them," she said.



GLOBE PHOTO / MICHAEL QUAN

**Greenhead boxes like these on the salt marsh of Duxbury Beach can trap as many as 1,000 of the annoying flies a day.**